

**Fertility Declines in Developing Countries:  
Do They Empower Women?**

**Anju Malhotra<sup>1</sup>  
and  
Nancy Riley<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>International Center for Research on Women, Washington DC

<sup>2</sup>Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME

**Abstract submitted for the PAA Meetings, 2009**

Contact: Anju Malhotra at [anju@icrw.org](mailto:anju@icrw.org)  
202-742-1248

## **Introduction:**

While the gender and demographic literature has focused on fertility declines as a potential outcome of women's empowerment and shifting gender relations, much less attention has been paid to the reverse causation: the transformative potential of fertility declines on women's lives and gender relations more broadly. For developed countries, this relationship has seemed to be so self-evident that it permeates discussions in the popular media. At the same time scholarly exploration of the connection is surprisingly limited. For developing country settings, where recent or ongoing demographic transitions are both reflecting and resulting in dramatic social, economic and political changes, a systematic understanding of this particular connection is almost completely absent. In this paper we begin addressing this research gap by reviewing the theoretical and empirical literature to explore the question: *Does reduced fertility create the conditions necessary to transform gender relations, and if so, under what circumstances?*

Answering this question at this particular time in history is important for the field of demography from a number of perspectives. First, the field itself is under siege, having to justify its relevance from an international perspective. With fertility rates declining across an ever increasing number of counties, the historical justification for addressing population issues in developing countries seems to be no longer relevant. Given such declines, the primary contention of the 1994 ICPD agenda, that women's empowerment is essential for fertility declines, also does not seem to be borne out: in many countries fertility levels have come down without an impetus from improvements in women's status. The Cairo agenda, has also lost currency as a policy priority with the ascendancy of the Bush administration in the United States, and with the shifting of UN and governmental priorities to the Millennium Development goals. The resulting sense is that population issues in fact have little to do with development processes, and gender issues may be equally insignificant for population processes. A counter-argument of significant vision and magnitude is necessary to reground population and gender issues as central to the development agenda.

In this paper we argue that population processes and gender issues are intimately connected, and that declining fertility levels have the potential to set the stage for fundamental transformations in gender relations that then have implications not only for women's lives, but also for broader development processes. To the extent that control over women's childbearing has been a defining basis for gender inequality in the first place, a shift to lower fertility levels can set the stage for reducing the motivation for such control, and thus radically transforming gender dynamics. We further argue that the realization of this potential is significantly conditioned by the cultural, social, and economic context within which fertility levels declines, as well as by the population policies, infrastructure and contraceptive means shaping the fertility declines in any given society.

## **Research Design**

The paper builds the above argument using two sets of analysis. First, we draw on four seemingly disparate, but highly connected strands of the theoretical and empirical literature to weave together an exploration of themes and questions central to our contention. The four strands we tap include:

- 1) the literature on birth control as a movement in the U.S. and Europe, and the motivation, context, and consequences of the pill and legal abortion for women's options and gender relations;
- 2) the demographic literature on the policies, socio-economic conditions, contraceptive delivery mechanisms, and other factors that have been propelled fertility declines in various developing countries;
- 3) the anthropological literature on the meaning of reproduction, and how gender relations in different societies reflect and respond to cultural priorities and trends regarding the importance of motherhood; and
- 4) the feminist literature on the fundamental connection between control of women's sexuality and the importance of childbearing;

Second, we use a combination of quantitative trend data for a set of 20 developing countries as well as qualitative excerpts from country cases studies by anthropologists and demographers to assess how our theoretical formulations bear out against the recent historical experience of specific countries. This "mapping" of relevant country data and analysis adds to the analysis by highlighting commonalities and differences, and thus providing us with greater validation for developing a conceptual framework that captures the central tenets of our argument and more specifically elaborates the relationship between fertility declines and shifts in gender equality.

### **Analysis**

Our analysis of the literature explores several key themes. One key theme focuses on the means for the control of reproduction. We look at the type of contraceptive options (including abortion) that have been important in bringing about fertility declines in various countries, what technological biases or innovations they represented, whether they were exclusively emphasized or in combination with other options, and how safely and effectively they were delivered. We also consider the type of delivery mechanisms, in terms of health care infrastructure and the role of the private sector, as well as where the ultimate control on both the access and use of contraception or abortion lay: with women, with men, with the family, the community, or the state.

A second theme is the conditions under which fertility declines occur. We examine the extent to which some policy, social, and economic factors are likely to give women control over their childbearing while fertility declines occur. For example, are economic options or social mobility for women a prerequisite or can they emerge as opportunities for women once the demographic transition has taken place? We also examine the argument that an existing momentum for social, economic, and political change (for example through war, revolution, conflict, or rapid growth) is perhaps a prerequisite for women gaining control of reproduction in tandem with fertility declines.

A related theme focuses on the society wide separation of sexuality and reproduction brought about by fertility declines. We attempt to systematically examine if the separation of sexuality and reproduction starts creating fundamental shifts in marriage, family and gender systems. Once having 2-3 children rather than “as many as God gives” becomes a social norm and personal preference, is sexuality as an end in itself social recognized and are there demonstrable ways in which women gain control over their own sexuality?

Another important theme for consideration is the domains of empowerment that become viable for women once fertility declines. Recent reviews indicate that there is broad conceptual agreement in the gender literature on empowerment being defined as “control of strategic life choices.” This control is centered first and foremost in the agency women exhibit, and secondarily in the resources and opportunities that enable the exercise of agency. There is also agreement, however, that empowerment is multilevel and multi-dimensional, and that acquisition of control in one arena of life, or at a given level does not necessarily mean control in other arenas or at other levels. The experience of women in many developed countries suggests that control over reproduction broke gender barriers in both the private and public spheres, and in multiple domains, from labor force opportunities, to political participation. It is a question of equal interest for developing countries to see if the potential for transformation in gender relations is as broad-based.

In mapping country level data, we include a subsample of countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, representing different stages of the demographic transition, from countries like Taiwan and South Korea which experienced rapid fertility declines in the 1960’s and 1970’s, to countries like Tunisia and Morocco where fertility declined in the 1980’s to countries like Peru and India where fertility has declined more gradually and recently. In addition to tracking basic trend data on TFR’s, contraception rates, growth rates, women’s labor force participation, educational levels, etc., we consider some of the in depth analysis of shifts in reproductive behavior in countries like Egypt and Ghana.

The paper synthesizes our analysis in a conceptual framework that we hope will serve as a guide for further and deeper country and cross-country analyses on this question. Overall, we see the paper as synthesizing available evidence and providing a platform for further empirical research.

